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SUBJ: KAZAKHSTAN: JANUARY 27 MEDIA ROUNDUP

Ref: A) Almaty 49; B) Almaty 158; C) 05 Almaty 4175; D) 05

Almaty 3453

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. This is the latest in a series of cables reporting on developments among Kazakhstan's media. On January 1 the Dauir printing firm refused to print several opposition newspapers, due to what Dauir said was the need to swap out its equipment. Vremya Print, which had printed the papers until September 26, 2005, took over as printer. Respublika won the legal right to publish its Assandi Times version, while fighting another court action to close down its current owner. Television stations ignored opposition leader Galymzhan Zhakiyanov's January 15 homecoming and his January 17 press conference. The majority shareholder of the highest circulation weekly newspaper Vremya was reportedly pressured to sell his shares to an alleged front man for Marat Tazhin, the President's deputy head of administration. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Galymzhan Zhakiyanov, the opposition leader who spent more than three and a half years in prison on politically-motivated charges, arrived at a train station in Almaty on January 15 to a hero's welcome from a crowd of 300-600 people (Ref B). Western wire services and local newspapers provided broad coverage of the event, but no Kazakhstani television station covered it. There was also no local coverage of Zhakiyanov's January 17 press conference even though more than 10 TV crews were pressed into the standing room only event. Gul'zhan Yergaliyeva, editor of opposition weekly Svoboda Slova, questioned why the TV crews showed up, adding that she knew they would not report on the event.

Assandi Times, aka Respublika, Wins One in Court

¶3. (U) Respublika, the opposition paper registered simultaneously under several different names, won a court victory on January 18, when the Supreme Court ruled against the Information Ministry's order to liquidate the paper's Assandi Times version. However, on September 26, the Almaty procurator declared that all issues of Respublika, including the versions known as Syet.kz; Ekonomika, Finasy, Rynki; Pyatoye Izmereniye; and Assandi Times, were illegal and subject to confiscation. Separate appeals were filed

for all versions and Assandi Times was the last on the list. The others were all liquidated.

¶4. (SBU) In an interview with the opposition website kub.kz, independent journalist Sergey Duvanov said he believes Assandi Times won its case only because the presidential elections were over. In his view, the paper had lost its pre-election significance when it was a campaign tool for the opposition. Emboff asked Respublika lawyer Sergey Utkin why the Assandi Times had been allowed to publish, while other versions had not. He said he did not know the reason, and was puzzled by the decision.

Latest Move in Respublika's Ownership Shell Game

¶5. (U) Meanwhile, the Astana procurator's office has filed a lawsuit in Almaty's inter-district economic court to close down the owner of Respublika's latest version, "Pravo. Ekonomika. Politika. Kultura." (PEPK). The legal owner of PEPK is a public foundation known as "The Public Committee for the Fight against Corruption." The procurator alleges the foundation engaged in activities inappropriate for an NGO, and that are rightfully the tasks of law enforcement agencies. If the procurator wins the lawsuit against the foundation, then by law the registration certificate for PEPK would be annulled, and PEPK would have to stop publishing.

¶6. (U) To prevent that possibility, PEPK editors persuaded the foundation before the new year to transfer ownership to PEPK's editorial offices. As required by law, they duly informed the Information Ministry of the ownership transfer in an open letter to Yermukhamet Yertysbayev, the newly

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appointed Minister of Culture, Information and Sport, in an open letter on the front page of PEPK's January 20 issue.

Vremya Print Gets Opposition Papers back from Daur Print

¶7. (U) Daur Print, the printing house reputedly owned by Svetlana Nazarbayeva, the President's sister-in-law, stopped printing several opposition newspapers on January 11. The company said the action was necessary to swap out its equipment. Kazakhstani media rights advocates and the U.S. media advocacy organization Committee to Protect Journalists argued the real reason was to stop publishing newspapers that often criticized President Nazarbayev.

¶8. (U) Vremya Print, part of the holding company of the weekly newspaper by the same name, took over printing Svoboda Slova, Aptakz and Epokha; Business Info took over printing PEPK. As reported Ref C, Vremya Print had printed opposition papers until September 26, when opposition editors claim the firm was pressured by authorities into refusing the print contracts.

Administration Allegedly Behind Take-Over of Vremya

¶9. (SBU) Vremya's deputy editor-in-chief Marat Asipov told emboff January 26 that Nulzhan Subhanberdin, the paper's majority shareholder and director of Kazkommertsbank (KKB), was pressured into selling his share to a "front man" for Marat Tazhin, the deputy head of the presidential administration. When pressed, he declined to name the buyer, and said only that it was a name not known in the media community. (Comment: While Asipov's allegation that Tazhin is the real owner cannot be verified, the desire to own such a prize media property as Vremya is understandable. Vremya has the highest circulation (180,000) of any newspaper in Kazakhstan. It is judged by media peers to have the most professional reporters and highest reportorial ethics and standards. End comment.)

¶10. (SBU) The players and the plays in the Vremya buyout follow the Karavan scenario of the late 1990's. Before founding Vremya in 1999, editor-in-chief Igor Meltzer headed the tabloid Karavan (circulation 220,000), which was likewise an influential and respected news outlet under his stewardship. In 1997 Rakhmat Aliyev, then-head of the tax police and husband of Dariga Nazarbayeva, the President's eldest daughter, bought Karavan. He subsequently turned it into a pro-government, anti-opposition tabloid.

¶11. (SBU) Asipov said he anticipates the new owner wants "to turn Vremya into another Karavan." Asipov said Meltzer has already registered a new publication with the Information Ministry, and is ready to start a new paper if Vremya's new owner tries to exert too much control. Though not willing to speculate too far in advance, Asipov believes the prospective publication would be printed by Vremya Print, in which Subhanberdin retains his majority stake.

¶12. (SBU) COMMENT: The Assandi Times court victory is a positive development. However, Kazakhstani authorities show no signs of relinquishing their influence over media. The television blackouts of opposition leader Zhakiyanov's return and first press conference indicate the administration's willingness to interfere with broadcast media. Regarding Vremya, the allegation that Presidential advisor Tazhin is the paper's new owner remains unsubstantiated. It's also unclear if the buyout of the newspaper is an attempt to bring it under government control. Should the latter turn out to be the case, Vremya editor Meltzer will probably start up a new paper, most likely with financial backing from Subhandberdin. Meltzer has shown in the past that he is gifted at -starting up profitable, informative, and entertaining newspapers that also present a variety of views to their readership. End comment.

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